

An article of **DailyProgress.com**
The Daily Progress



Local lawyer receives child advocacy award

By Liesel Nowak
Daily Progress staff writer
Monday, August 15, 2005



Andy Block established the JustChildren program at the Legal Aid Justice Center. The Daily Progress/ Andrew Shurtleff executive director of the Legal Aid Justice Center, which houses JustChildren.

The Young Lawyers Division of the American Bar Association has awarded a Charlottesville attorney its Child Advocacy Award for distinguished service on behalf of children.

Andy Block established the JustChildren program at the Legal Aid Justice Center in 1998, and has helped it grow into a thriving organization with statewide influence.

The 40-year-old father of three is the 27th person, and the first who represents a Virginia organization, to receive the honor.

"He has done more for Virginia since 1998 than many do in a lifetime," said Alex Gulotta,

The program focuses on providing legal support to youngsters in the area of education, health care, juvenile justice and advocacy and outreach.

JustChildren has achieved statewide success, including compelling the state to take better care of its former juvenile prisoners, securing educational rights for foster children and helping train lawyers, volunteers and social workers on the legal rights of children.

"I'm humbled," Block said. "You know, I get the award, but there are a lot of people who work at JustChildren, or have worked here in the past, that do a lot of great work that I get the prize for."

Block's desire to help children was solidified by years of work involving youngsters.

After graduating from Yale University, the Chicago native taught for a year in a rural village in Kenya then worked in a juvenile justice program in New Mexico. As a public defender in Seattle, Block represented children in courts.

The lawyer came to Charlottesville in 1997 to be with his girlfriend, now wife, Kelli. Despite not having passed the bar in Virginia, and without knowing a soul in the city, Block sought to build a program to help children.

Armed with his experience in Seattle's innovative "Team Child" program, designed to provide a

holistic approach to juvenile justice, Block came to Virginia with an vision to improve access to education and mental health needs as well build as a smarter juvenile justice system.

In 1998, with no start-up funding, Block created JustChildren. The program was eventually awarded a Soros Justice Fellowship from billionaire philanthropist George Soros, helping launch the program that it is today, with five staff lawyers, a community organizer and a budget of more than \$400,000.

"In a very short time, Andy has had a major impact on the quality of legal services provided to Virginia's children," wrote University of Richmond Law School professor Adrienne Volenik in Block's nomination letter. "He has become a force to be reckoned with, and his work has impacted the lives of hundreds of young people across the state."

JustChildren played a major role in the passage of legislation that gives more than 8,000 foster children in Virginia the right to enroll immediately in new schools and the opportunity, in some circumstances, to remain in their home schools even when they have been placed in a new foster home beyond the current division or attendance zone lines.

Block and his staff also handle individual cases on the local level, helping students gain access to alternative schools and social services.

JustChildren staffer Angela A. Ciolfi said the program's success can be attributed to Block's philosophy of working on broader policy issues while taking the time to be an advocate on a case-by-case basis.

"He sees the forest and the trees at the same time," Ciolfi said. "He has so many ideas you want to work on all of them."

Ciolfi first worked at Legal Aid while a law student at the University of Virginia through the Child Advocacy Clinic, which Block established in 1999.

Frank Cervone, executive director of Philadelphia's Support Center for Child Advocates, also received the American Bar Association's award for child advocacy. He met Block about three years ago as the pair created the National Children's Law Network, a national group of eight children's law programs, including JustChildren.

"He brings fresh optimism and a can-do attitude to apparently unattainable goals, and his success in moving the Virginia legislature to a commitment to the education of youths in [the state's] care demonstrated his skill," Cervone said.

"Lots of us public-interest advocates are known for not taking 'no' for an answer, but Andy makes you want to say 'yes.' I am a big fan."

Contact Liesel Nowak at (434) 978-7274 or lnowak@dailyprogress.com.

This story can be found at: http://www.dailyprogress.com/servlet/Satellite?pagename=CDP%2FMGArticle%2FCDP_BasicArticle&c=MGArticle&cid=1031784443338&path=!news

[Go Back](#)